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THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CECIL RHODES.

BY A BRITISH OFFICER.

[The following article is unsigned for obvious reasons; but it is from the pen of a well-known officer who has taken an active part in the war, and who undoubtedly expresses the views of his brother officers.—EDITOR.]

THAT the military situation in South Africa is one of exceptional gravity is incontestable. But that we are, therefore, justified in accepting all or any of the gloomy forebodings as to the outcome of the war is both absurd and an insult to the tenacity and determination of the Anglo-Saxon race.

There was a time in the great struggle for the American Union, when the immense armies of the North were headed and checked by the determined valor of the Southern States, aided by the difficulties of the country which formed the theatre of war. Nor were there then wanting critics who predicted the collapse of the Federal forces, and counselled the abandonment of the struggle and acquiescence in the dismemberment of the States. Fortunately for the American nation, and also for the civilized world, more courageous men directed her destinies, the unhappy strife was brought to a close, and a settlement effected honorable alike to both parties. Now that time has healed the wounds and softened the animosities of that terrible epoch in history, it seems incredible that the great and powerful branch of the Anglo-Saxon race who govern America could, at one time, have been in such deadly peril of dismemberment and disintegration.

It is the custom of races less robust in physique and more excitable in temperament than are the Anglo-Saxons to be unduly elated at any success which may be gained by their arms, and proportionately depressed and despondent at any reverse which may fall to them. Our neighbors across the Channel have ever been famous for the confidence and light-heartedness with which they embark in war, and the rapidity with which they fall into the

depths of despondency when victory does not immediately attend their efforts. In such circumstances, they have ever found an unfailing solace in attributing all their bad luck to treachery. "*Nous sommes trahis*" has for years served as a consolatory explanation for disaster and defeat. The student of military history can hardly refrain from a smile when this oft-repeated reason is adduced for mismanagement or failure. Napoleon, in his ingenuous account of the defeat he sustained at Waterloo, lays the blame upon certain traitors, who at the precise instant when victory had declared for the French arms, raised cries of "*Sauve qui peut*" and others of similarly encouraging nature. In 1870, the aggressive shouts of "*à Berlin*" were rapidly supplanted by "*nous sommes trahis*," when, in battle after battle, the superior strength, discipline and organization of the German hosts had become apparent to all the world.

It is well in these days for Englishmen to call to mind this unpleasant trait in their neighbor's character, which they profess to despise so heartily. For there is a risk that some of the more nervous and excitable members of the community may be led into similar ungraceful and unedifying demonstrations, with reference to our petty reverses in South Africa.

That traitors have been at work and have in no small degree assisted the enemy, either directly or indirectly, by misleading and misdirecting our military authorities, is indeed most probable. But that we should at once raise the refrain of "We are betrayed!" is both undignified and ridiculous. So far, the nation has received the news of our successive disappointments in a manner which has elicited the grudging praise of even the most bitterly hostile Continental journals. It would be well, therefore, that we should, in the face of any possible further check or disaster, remember that the eyes of the whole civilized world are upon us, and that it is the sacred duty as well as the inherited birthright of Britons to receive, unmoved, news either of defeat or of victory.

Nelson, writing to a military officer in 1801, bitterly animadverted as follows on the celebrations which marked the conclusion of peace with France in that year:

"I dislike all these childish rejoicings for peace. It is a good thing, I hope, but I would *burst* before I would let a d—d rascal of a Frenchman know that either peace or war affected me with either joy or sorrow! . . . D—n them all! is the constant prayer of your much obliged and affectionate friend,
NELSON."

Such is the true Anglo-Saxon spirit, and it were well if, in these days of mock sentiment and exaggerated censure and praise, we were to keep in mind the undaunted words of our great hero, and endeavor to follow them in practice.

Now, although we most sternly deprecate any attempt to make excuse for our own shortcomings and reverses by following the example of the French, no harm can accrue, and indeed much good may come, from a critical examination of some of the exterior forces which have undoubtedly influenced our military operations in South Africa.

For good or for evil, the most commanding figure in that region at the close of the nineteenth century is assuredly that of Cecil Rhodes. Never was there a man about whom such opposite views were held, and so strongly held. It is, of course, an enormous gain to him that his most bitter and irreconcilable enemies are the Boers. This of itself has been sufficient passport for him to obtain the suffrages of a vast number of the British public. Added to this is the undoubted fact that he has, of late, posed as the one loyal Minister and representative of the Imperial Power, as against the veiled disloyalty and dishonesty of the Afrikander party. In mentioning the latter, we purposely exclude the name of Schreiner, for it is still a disputed question at the Cape whether that individual is an honest fool, who has failed to appreciate the corruption and villainy of the members of the Bund who direct his movements, or a most accomplished, disloyal knave, who, under the veil of being a constitutional representative, is quietly doing his best to undermine and subvert British rule in South Africa.

It will thus be seen that Cecil Rhodes has an extraordinarily good start in the direction of general popularity; so good a start, indeed, that, unless there is something overwhelmingly to his disadvantage, of which the public is ignorant, it would seem hardly possible to oust him from the commanding position he has seized upon with such consummate assurance. His early indiscretion of subsidizing the disloyal party in Ireland to the tune of £10,000, although not forgotten, is one that has long since been forgiven, as are more egregious failures which leave no ill results behind.

The wearisome wrangle as to the amount of his complicity in the Raid is also a matter which it is not worth while here to revive. All men in touch with South Africa are well aware of how deeply he was involved in that miserable fiasco.

The injury to British interests in South Africa caused by the Raid is enormous, and, as military men know bitterly to their cost, the price is now being paid in their own blood and in that of their heroic soldiers. For it was the Raid which rendered it possible for President Krüger to add to his already abnormally heavy armaments, and to openly import thousands of rifles and millions of cartridges, not to speak of ordnance and other war material, which could only be destined for use against the Suzerain Power; and this without a word of remonstrance from the latter.

But the indictment against Cecil Rhodes, and one which he will before long be called upon to answer before the tribunal of the whole civilized world, is of far graver import than one of subsidizing Irish rebels or of financing raiders. It is no less than that he, for reasons which are strongly suspected, if not already known and capable of proof, deliberately misled the British nation, so as to bring about the present war in South Africa for his own personal aggrandizement and the fulfillment of his ambitious schemes. Truly, a stupendous charge to bring against a man who has been, and may again be, the Prime Minister of the Colony which is now suffering so much from the effects of war.

All known circumstances, however, tend to prove that Cecil Rhodes has acted throughout in a manner which indicates that he not only concealed facts of vital importance, which were well within his knowledge, but that he, when occasion demanded it, wilfully and gratuitously made mis-statements of fact well calculated to mislead both the Government and the nation.

That he is an absolutely unscrupulous man may be accepted as proved by his cynical conduct in subsidizing the Irish disloyal party, and by his unblushing effrontery when his connection with the Raid was brought to light.

Taking the present charges in succession, the first in military parlance may be thus paraphrased: "In that he, knowing well the great extent of the armaments and preparations for an aggressive war against Great Britain being made by the South African Republic, wilfully misled the nation, by his solemn assurance of last summer that there would be no war."

That he was morally bound to tell the truth in this matter may be taken as granted, viewing his position and influence in Rhodesia and Cape Colony. That he should so calmly tell what he well knew was a falsehood is, therefore, unpardonable. True is it that

the Transvaal had been preparing for war for years, and that its preparations were practically completed last summer. Hence, it may fairly be argued that nothing would have stopped it from declaring war, as it did upon the first favorable opportunity presenting itself.

Unfortunately for this argument, we are met by the fact that the mounted Boers require food for their horses, and that it is impossible for them to move in any numbers through their country during the winter and early spring months—from June to September—and until the spring rains cause the young grasses to grow.

The effect, therefore, of Cecil Rhodes's solemn assurance was to lull the natural anxiety aroused by the reports of Boer armaments and aggressive actions. No sooner had this difficulty of subsistence disappeared than the mask was thrown aside, and the Boer determination to fight plainly shown. Had Great Britain taken action in July or August, an adequate force could have been thrown into Natal before the Boers could have mustered in sufficient numbers to overwhelm that colony. Also even had they thus mustered, the Boers would have been unable to keep the field, owing to want of subsistence at that time of the year.

Thus it will be seen that the direct effects of Cecil Rhodes's concealment of the Boer preparations, of which he was surely cognizant, and of his repeated assurances that there would be no war, combined most disastrously to mislead a Government by no means too energetic in its guardianship of national interests; and also to soothe the awakening anxieties of the nation, which somehow began to realize at last that things were not going quite well in South Africa.

We now come to the second charge which Cecil Rhodes stands arraigned upon. When the war broke out, for reasons at present unknown, he proceeded to Kimberley. At first, nobody paid much attention to this, beyond being somewhat amused at the energy of the Boers in at once surrounding and laying siege to the town which contained their detested enemy. Had Rhodes been content to remain as one of the many civilians shut up there, nothing more would probably have been said. But this was precisely what he was unable to do. A man who has wielded such immense powers and has realized the advantages which great wealth confers, could not remain a passive spectator under such circumstances. Thus,

before long we find him interfering, and interfering disastrously, as we shall prove, with the general conduct of the war.

To follow what we now propose to describe, it is first necessary that the general plan of campaign, as arranged for the expedition, should be understood. It was assumed, erroneously, as facts have turned out, that Sir George White, with his Natal field force of some 12,000 men, would be able to keep the invaders of the Transvaal at bay. That he could have done so, had he elected to hold the line of the Tugela, is, of course, open to discussion. Such, however, was the original idea, which, of course, must be considered in conjunction with the general scheme. This latter was to assemble an army corps and a cavalry division in Cape Colony, and to advance on Bloemfontein and through the Orange Free State on Pretoria. It was reckoned, and with good reason, that any such advance would quickly have the effect of reducing the pressure on White in Natal, since the bulk of the Transvaal and Free State forces would most certainly be withdrawn to oppose a British advance through the heart of the Orange Free State. It would also, of course, have drawn off the Boer commandoes besieging Kimberley.

Such, briefly, was the plan of campaign when Sir Redvers Buller landed at Cape Town on the 1st of November. But, during the seventeen days he had been at sea, the military situation had entirely changed. He now learned that the Boers had invaded Natal in overwhelming numbers, and that White had, after three battles in which he had worsted the enemy, been compelled to fall back on Ladysmith. He further heard how, owing to the unfortunate interference of the Civil Governor of Natal, all the munitions and stores had been collected at Ladysmith, thus obliging White to hold on to that town in place of retiring to the Tugela. To the north, Mafeking and Kimberley were beset and cut off; while many Boers were collecting along the Orange River and a commando had actually invaded the colony and advanced on Colesburg. Added to this was the unpleasant news that a vast number of the colonists were thoroughly disloyal, and anxiously awaiting a Boer success to take up arms against the colony! The troops available to withstand the impending Boer invasion were a small force of all arms at the Orange River Bridge, the remainder of the passages on that river being only held by the Colonial Police Force. At De Aar, an important junction, there were a few infantry and guns; while at

Stormberg and Naauwpoort, two railway junctions which commanded the line of advance on Bloemfontein, there was only a Naval Brigade and a detachment of infantry. Scattered here and there along over a thousand miles of railway were small parties of colonial volunteers, posted with a view to terrorizing the known disaffected colonial population. Truly an imposing force with which to keep the Boers, armed to the teeth, at bay!

Far away in England, some 6,000 miles distant, the famous Army Corps and Cavalry Division were being mobilized and put on board ship; a portion had indeed already been embarked and was somewhere near Madeira—not near enough to be of immediate use, unfortunately.

Buller must have seen at a glance the highly critical state of affairs in Natal; with White shut up in Ladysmith there was practically nothing to prevent the Boer invaders from sweeping the small forces at Maritzburg into the sea. Hence, he was compelled to direct every available battalion and battery as it arrived at Cape Town to Durban, thus, of course, diverting the stream of reinforcements from the true line of advance on Bloemfontein. On one point he was firm, namely, that the defence of Mafeking and Kimberley must be left to the local troops.

With a view to the general advance through the Free State, it was deemed advisable to collect a large depôt of supplies on the Orange River at the bridge of that name. This point afforded protection to the left flank of the advance, and if necessary would enable a flanking column to move on Kimberley or Bloemfontein, as might be considered desirable.

Things seemed to be going on fairly well. Strong reinforcements were pushed on to Natal, and a division under Lord Methuen assembled at De Aar, which was designed to advance to the Orange River at Norval's Pont.

It had been the custom, since the investment of Kimberley by the Boers, to keep up communications with the beleaguered garrison by men who knew the country well, and who were willing to risk the perils of breaking through the Boer lines for a consideration.

About the middle of November, when Kimberley had been invested for less than a month, one of these men succeeded in evading the Boer scouts and brought in a budget of news from Kimberley. He carried despatches for the military authorities, and also

for the Governor of Cape Colony and other high officials. The substance of these has since leaked out. For, while the military chief in Kimberley reported the situation as secure, Mr. Cecil Rhodes demanded the immediate despatch of a relief column to Kimberley before the end of the month.

Of course, it is impossible to say precisely what and whose influence were brought to bear; but the remarkable fact remains that Buller, despite his notorious objection and opposition to the despatch of any force for the relief of Kimberley, now suddenly ordered Methuen's division to advance to that town, thereby abandoning the original plan of operations for an indefinite period.

It was an open secret in the colony that Cecil Rhodes had thus forced Buller's hand, and against the latter's better judgment. As a proof of Buller's objection to this diversion of the nucleus of his fighting force from the true line of advance, it was well understood that its precise mission was to proceed to Kimberley and relieve that city, after which it was to return at once down the line to De Aar, and thus regain its position on the general line of advance into the Orange Free State.

All who have followed the movements of troops during the recent operations cannot have failed to remark on the repeated instances in which Buller has, as on this occasion, denuded his center and uncovered his line of advance by sending reinforcements to Natal and the Western Border. Excuses for the former may possibly be found, although we are of opinion that it would have been far sounder strategy to have merely sent *sufficient* troops to hold the line of the Tugela and protect the southern portion of the colony. Such an arrangement would have given Buller by this time an overwhelming force with which to advance on Bloemfontein.

But with regard to the latter, no such plea can be urged. It was obvious to all military men from the first that the correct way to secure the relief of Kimberley was by the occupation of Bloemfontein, and that any divergence of troops to that remote and unimportant part of the theatre of war involved a most dangerous splitting up of the British forces.

The truth of these criticisms is unfortunately borne out by the present condition of affairs. We see Buller twice roughly repulsed in his endeavor to break through the vast natural fortresses on the line of the Tugela. Methuen, on the other side, is headed and

checked full twenty miles short of his goal—Kimberley; whereas, in the center, the remaining forces are, at the time we write, only sufficient to keep the invading Boers, backed by the rebellious colonists, in check.

Reverting to our indictment of Cecil Rhodes, we maintain that the main cause of the present unfortunate deadlock in South Africa is directly attributable to his unwarrantable interference in the strategy of the campaign, resulting in the misdirection of Methuen's force, and the consequent breaking up of the army which ere now would have been operating on its proper line of advance with telling effect.

This is said in no spirit of desire to shift the responsibility from the military chiefs, upon whose shoulders the blame must inevitably fall. But it is well that the world, in criticising the campaign in South Africa and its, so far, abortive results, should not lose sight of the baleful influence which first misled the British public as regards the probabilities of war, and thus gave the Boers time to complete their arrangements for the invasion of our colonies; and, secondly, induced our military authorities to abandon the only sound plan of campaign for an indefinite period, and to hopelessly break up and disintegrate our forces at one of the most critical periods of our history.

A BRITISH OFFICER.